

SUCCESS STORY: Arts Connect Houston: Sustainability Through Partnerships



Arts Education + ARP and ESSER

This is the first in a series of success stories about how arts organizations, states, schools and other entities are using funding from the American Rescue Plan (ARP) and the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) to support arts education.

About Arts Connect Houston

In 2022, [Houston Independent School District](#) (HISD) received [\\$1.16 billion in ESSER II and ESSER III funding](#) and dedicated \$22 million for their fine arts department which encompasses visual arts, dance, theatre and music. HISD is the largest district in Texas and serves close to 195,000 students across 274 schools. Within HISD, 84 percent of enrolled students are Black or Latine, close to 100 languages are spoken and 79 percent of students come from low-income households. This financial support marks HISD’s largest investment in the arts to date and would not have been possible without years of ongoing collaboration and conversation as part of Houston’s collective impact initiative: [Arts Connect Houston](#).

Our story at Arts Connect Houston began in 2015 when a group of local leaders in Houston shared their concerns about the decline of arts education in the district’s schools. Like other districts across the United States, HISD schools were experiencing a continuous decline of arts education.¹ We knew that arts education was not equitable across the district, and while it had some thriving arts programs, there were also schools that did not offer any arts classes — what we call arts deserts. Depending on available funding, school leadership, competing priorities and the strength of existing relationships between schools and providers, arts programs might be available one year but not the next. Ultimately, we knew that not all students had access to the arts education necessary to support their academic, social and emotional wellbeing.

As the Houston community came together, we realized we could never erase disparities through isolated efforts and that we could accomplish more as a collective force. Essentially, systems change and a new way of working together was needed to transform students’ lives. What began as a pilot program is now a collective of more than 90 institutions working together so that every student, in every school, and in every classroom has access to the

¹ Daniel H. Bowen & Brian Kisida, “Investigating Causal Effects of Arts Education Experiences: Experimental Evidence from Houston’s Arts Access Initiative,” Research Report for the Houston Independent School District 7, no.4 (2019)

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arts as part of their complete education. [Our partners](#) include 89 arts and culture organizations, HISD, the local philanthropic community and the City of Houston, as well as other state and national-based partners. Arts Connect Houston is also a member of the [Any Given Child initiative](#) at the Kennedy Center and works alongside 26 other communities in the country to not only drive change in Houston, but across the nation as well.

Over the past seven years, we have worked as a collective community to expand equitable access to the arts for students. The time was not met without its challenges, as there are often many competing goals within the district and arts education has not always been a priority, but we have had huge wins along the way. In 2017, HISD created the [Fine Arts Department](#) which had not existed for more than 30 years. Most recently, HISD Superintendent Millard House II included the arts as a vital, core component of every student's education in his five-year strategic plan.

As part of this ESSER funding, Arts Connect Houston received an initial \$735,000 investment through the Fine Arts Department for the first of three years of designated funding. This funding will support our existing efforts, including the Arts Action Fund which provides grants to arts and culture organizations to conduct in-school arts programming and the Creative Schools Institute, which supports school leaders and teachers to achieve campus goals through and with the arts. This funding will also help launch the new RISE Transformation Schools Initiative, designed to bring robust arts education to HISD schools that are the least resourced.

Building and Sustaining Relationships

Arts Connect Houston is a collective impact organization and our entire collective centers on the idea that strong relationships drive systems and social change. This funding helps expand nearly a decade of relationship-building across stakeholders including HISD, the philanthropic community and local arts and culture organizations. HISD has been involved in this work since it began, and over time, we built deeper and broader relationships with HISD and its Fine Arts Department that positioned us as a potential partner when ESSER funding became available. This partnership demonstrates what we can accomplish through dedicated collective impact. We also collaborate with our 89 arts and culture partners for all initiatives, including through task forces devoted to planning and implementing various Arts Connect Houston projects. Our arts and culture partners also serve as program providers through the Arts Action Fund, Creative Schools Institute and RISE Transformation Schools Initiative, which will provide students with in-school and out-of-school programming and support professional development and networking opportunities for educators and administrators.

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This funding also helps us forge partnerships with new stakeholders. We are delighted to work with different groups that we have not yet worked with or that we have not worked with at the same depth. We are excited to connect directly with educators and campus administrators in a way that we have not been able to in the past, which will allow us to support their work in a more informed and responsive way. We will also be coordinating closely with diverse HISD stakeholders, such as wraparound specialists.

Funding Allocation

The funding we received from HISD will directly support our work in the 2022-23 school year and will be allocated to our Arts Action Fund (which will then be in its fifth year) and our Creative Schools Institute, which will expand the program beyond its pilot year and support work to double the number of schools we reached in the 2021-22 school year. The newest project will be the RISE Transformation Schools Initiative.

ESSER-Funded Programs

Arts Action Fund

- Existing program
- Invests a total of \$250,000 annually for in-school arts education programs across Houston ISD
- Funding available to Arts and Culture Partners to work with HISD schools
- Two grant types:
 - Seed: Supports partnership development
 - Learning, Innovation and Action: Invests in expanding pre-existing partnerships to allow for new innovation
- ESSER funding will contribute to overall \$250,000 fund

Creative Schools Institute

- Existing program
- Began with pilot program of five elementary schools in 2021-22 school year; will expand to 10 schools for 2022-23 school year
- Support for principal leadership and planning, teacher training in foundational arts integration strategies, direct student programming and the creation of an innovative group project designed to facilitate campus' continuous commitment to growth in the arts
- ESSER funding will help double the number of participating schools and fund key program elements

RISE Transformation Schools Initiative

- New program
- HISD selected Arts Connect Houston for \$300,000 in funding to support schools that have been designated as the lowest performing
- Initiative will focus on three areas: teacher supports (including professional development), direct programming (including in-school and out-of-school), and emergency funding (resources to address immediate gaps in ability to execute curriculum/programming on campuses)
- Entire Initiative funded by ESSER funds

Arts Connect Houston was selected to be part of a broader effort to improve HISD campuses that have been designated as the lowest-performing schools. [RISE \(redesign, innovate, support, empower\)](#) campuses will receive key supports directed at improving student experience and outcomes. Our collective impact work will primarily focus on professional development for fine arts educators and other administrators; high-quality in-school and out-of-school instruction; and programming that addresses students' most pressing needs

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including arts integration, social-emotional learning and equity-centered pedagogical practices.

“We are very excited that HISD selected Arts Connect to help support RISE campuses as this shows that the district recognizes the value of arts education as a necessary component to students’ complete education,” said Deborah Lugo, Arts Connect Houston’s Executive Director. “We would not be ready to launch such a significant program without the foundation of trust we collectively built. We are delighted to begin a new chapter of our relationship with HISD and further our long history of collaboration.”

Early Successes and Outcomes

We are very excited about the innovative and generative ideas that have developed because of this funding. We are delighted to expand upon our Creative Schools Institute (CSI), which was in its pilot program during the 2021-22 year. The ESSER funds from HISD will support CSI by funding key program elements, such as extra duty pay for teachers attending integration training, supporting Innovative Project Mentors and providing funds for implementing innovative projects on each CSI campus.

Additionally, the RISE Transformation Schools Initiative marks a new approach to our work. Collectively, we have designed a structure that centers student experience and outcomes. While students have always been the focus of our work, this structure truly brings every question back to: ‘How does this bring learners joy? How does this arts experience enrich their lives?’ Our arts and culture partners have also been inspired by this new program and have begun thinking about the ways they might further execute cross-institutional programming and projects and utilize new collaborations to create the best possible experiences for students. Our arts and culture partners are also thinking about outside-the-box ways to offer supports, including providing professional development, community events, educator and student perks and more. This funding has injected a burst of creativity into our community, which is eager to innovate new ways to serve HISD students.

Partnership Potential

This new RISE Transformation Schools Initiative will enable us to build new partnerships, including funding arts programming in 14 schools that we have not connected with in prior rounds of our Arts Action Fund. We are also focusing on expanding our relationships with educators and administrators across all 24 RISE Transformation School campuses. Previously, we established these relationships on a very sporadic basis, but this new funding will increase staff capacity and resources necessary to cultivate deeper partnerships. The structure of the RISE Transformation Schools Initiative will include funding for out-of-school-

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time arts opportunities and will engage Arts Connect Houston and our partners in students' communities. Previously, funding was allocated exclusively for in-school learning, which does not emphasize family engagement work.

Overcoming Barriers

HISD has gone through some significant challenges over the past few years, including superintendent transitions, a threatening of a state takeover and, like all other districts across the nation, a worldwide pandemic. A lack of stability can often make it difficult for organizations like Arts Connect Houston to maintain consistent support. However, our view is that our support should be ongoing because of the challenges HISD faces. Regardless of what is happening at the city or state level, the students we serve deserve attention, care and quality education. So, through easy times and difficult ones, our work is unwavering. It can certainly be challenging dealing with uncertainty but, as a collective impact initiative, that is what we are here for, and we can endure more together than we can as individual organizations. Keeping students at the forefront of everything we do helps make barriers to our work feel less daunting; the question is not 'Do we or do we not do this?' but instead 'In the face of this obstacle, how do we accomplish this?' It is never an option not to continue improving HISD students' lives. Arts Connect Houston's approach has made tumultuous times in the district less impactful to our work because we have nurtured relationships with educators, administrators and staff to show that we are a reliable and supportive partner.

Documenting and Communicating the Work

We previously tracked various metrics related to our Arts Action Fund, and, in 2022, we are piloting a comprehensive report and hope to put together a new report each year. We are also carefully tracking the progress of each campus participating in the Creative Schools Institute, both to celebrate successes and to support campuses throughout the program. Specific staff will be asked to complete surveys at strategic points during the two-year program. Anecdotal stories will be captured during regular check-ins between campus staff and the Arts Connect Houston team, which may include site visits during programming. Campus progress and success stories will be shared periodically through our newsletters and social media channels. For the RISE Transformation Schools Initiative, we will distribute surveys to all students receiving arts programming with the goal of utilizing data to both share case studies of impactful programs as well as generate an overall report showing the positive outcomes of direct student programming. We will also capture informal feedback from participating teachers and administrators and plan to incorporate this feedback into future iterations of the program and in our reporting to highlight what we learn about cultivating successful and sustaining school-organization partnerships.

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Planning for Sustainability

We would not be embarking on this initiative without having positioned sustainability at the forefront of our work. Arts Connect Houston began as a response, in part, to a lack of sustainable arts education, which remains a significant issue and key priority within our organization. We understand that important and significant change takes time. We plant the seeds of relationships and ideas, constantly tend to them and experience the results of our community-centered work much later. As the proverb goes, 'if you want to go fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go together.'

In terms of the structure of our various projects, our leadership and partners have ensured that every decision connects back to equity and sustainability. We would not consider our diverse initiatives successful if they do not create opportunities for students and educators now and in the future. We want to give educators the tools and network to continue growing in their fields. We want to continue to build relationships between arts organizations and schools that will continue beyond this initial funding. We want students to see that the arts are and will continue to be part of their lives and are a space for creativity, self-expression and exploration.

Commitment to Creative Culture

The ESSER funding Arts Connect received from HISD's Fine Arts Department will result in an incredible impact for students. "Having the collective partners working with us to impact the lives of students and truly deepen student opportunities and potentials for success is an amazing force for positive effect and learning. Our work in the Fine Arts Department is richly affected and enriched due to the collective impact work of Arts Connect Houston," shared Wenden Sanders, HISD's Fine Arts Director.

Our collective impact model magnifies this funding because we can, as a partner body, collaborate to imagine big ideas and execute them in a way an individual organization cannot. The ESSER funding we received will be gone after three years, but the relationships we are investing in with those dollars will continue to exist. We know that this funding will help build foundations now for work that our collective will sustain into the future.

We are also very excited that HISD committed \$22 million to the Fine Arts Department. Fine arts are the seventh most funded ESSER program for HISD and comes after major investments, such as HVAC and employee and teacher stipends. This demonstrates that HISD considers arts education an important investment for educational outcomes and indicates that fine arts are a key priority in the district. "One of the primary focuses of our recently shared five-year strategic plan for HISD is providing equitable opportunities and

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resources for every HISD school,” Deputy Superintendent Dr. Rick Cruz said. “As part of that focus, HISD is invested in growing arts education programs and educators, ensuring that every student has access to an arts teacher. We know that the arts are an important part of every child’s education, and we are committed to building a creative culture in the district that supports the skill development, emotional growth and community-building arts education instills in our scholars.”

Acknowledgments

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Arts Connect Houston is a collective impact organization that advances equitable access to arts education for every Houston ISD student by driving systems change and positioning the arts as essential to a complete education. Using data, capacity building, advocacy, and strategic funding, Arts Connect creates new pathways for students, schools, and Houston ISD to implement high-quality arts education. An education rich in the arts supports students’ social and emotional development and prepares them for success in college, career, and life. Our growing collective of 90+ partners is closing the arts access gaps for students.

Houston ISD is committed to equitably educating the whole child so that every student graduates with the tools necessary to reach their full potential. The district believes that classrooms and schools should be safe, vibrant, joyful spaces where students are guaranteed access to a challenging and deep educational experience. Houston ISD is the 8th largest school district in the United States and the largest in Texas. The district serves 194,607 students annually.



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About AEP Success Stories

The Arts Education Partnership at Education Commission of the States is a national network of more than 100 organizations dedicated to advancing arts education. AEP has been supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. Department of Education since 1995 and is administered by Education Commission of the States. AEP is the nation's hub for arts and education leaders, building their leadership capacity to support students, educators and learning environments. Through research, reports, convenings and counsel, leaders gain knowledge and insights to ensure that all learners — especially those that have historically been marginalized — receive an excellent arts education. To achieve its goal to expand access to high-quality arts learning opportunities for all learners, AEP gathers detailed information on success stories with the potential to be replicated in communities across the country.

The Success Stories project collects submissions from organizations that highlight successful arts education programs. These stories demonstrate the benefits of arts education and promote continued collaboration and learning for individuals and organizations working toward student achievement and success. This story is part of a new initiative that highlights how arts organizations, schools, states, and other entities across the country are using American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds to support and expand access to arts education.

Interested in sharing how ARP funding is growing your work in supporting arts education? Contact Cassandra at cquillen@ecs.org to learn how you can get involved.

